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How should we define vernacular literature?*

Originally I was given the task of clarifying the distinction between vernacular and learned literature. I have no definitive answer to the question "How should we define vernacular literature?" Instead I can only offer some remarks which I hope will be helpful. Afterwards, I shall present to you certain texts and then consider whether they belong to the category of vernacular literature or not. I shall focus on the period prior to 1500, in other words, up to the end of the Byzantine era. In the following, therefore, I will treat vernacular literature as part of Byzantine Literature.

To begin with, allow me first to briefly present the linguistic situation in the Greek-speaking world during the Middle Ages (cf. Browning 1983, Horrocks 1997) and touch on certain problems of terminology.

Since Antiquity the Byzantines had inherited the usage of classicizing Greek for a wide range of literary genres. In particular, for all kinds of rhetorical texts ancient and late antique authors served as models. Higher education aimed at providing a thorough familiarity with these models, firstly in order to understand them and secondly in order to compose texts by imitating the models. Since the range of recommended patterns extends from Homer to George of Pisidia (i.e. texts from the 8th c. B.C. to the 7th c. A.D.) and since authors were inevitably influenced, to a greater or lesser degree, by their everyday language, in most cases the textual product was a peculiar mixture with a specific Byzantine character, which however – and this has to

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be stressed – does not mean chaotic or arbitrary. The majority of less literary types of text however (such as theological treatises, hagiography, popular narratives) were composed in a less pretentious idiom, though also quite different from the spoken language, somewhat comparable to the late antique koine and hence termed "Schriftkoine". Both classicizing Greek and the literary koine had to be learned in school. Simple forms of this Byzantine koine made considerable concessions to everyday language, but only from the 12th c. on, was an idiom close to the spoken language used for the composition of literary texts. The latter category of texts, written in a language fairly close to the spoken, we usually refer to as vernacular literature, whereas all other texts are called learned.

Despite certain parallels, the language situation was not comparable with the phenomenon of modern Greek *diglossia*. Atticizing Greek was never the official language of the state. Its usage was restricted to specific types of literature. Members of the imperial court functioned as patrons of this kind of literature, but official documents were drafted in the Byzantine koine, while in the case of diplomatic contacts with foreigners an idiom verging on the vernacular was used.

Because the so-called learned language apparently does not differ much from ancient Greek, except that it is supposedly of much lower quality, in general scholars of Byzantine literature have not bothered much about it. On the other hand, both historical linguists and scholars of Modern Greek literature, for different reasons of course, have shown considerable interest in the vernacular language. Nevertheless, scholars of the vernacular literature tend to assess the language of their texts from a very distant point of view, namely Modern Greek. Thus, they too frequently come to the conclusion that the language of the texts they are dealing with is underdeveloped and deficient.

Let's turn briefly to terminology, especially to the English terms "vernacular" and "popular" and corresponding terms in other languages.

The tripartite differentiation of Byzantine literature as set out in the handbooks (Beck 1959 and 1971, Hunger 1978) still has a huge influence on the field. According to this scheme we divide Byzantine literary production into learned (secular or theological) and popular literature. Content or topic is the guiding criterion of this

differentiation. Language functions as a secondary criterion. The first two categories of text are written in an archaising language, while popular literature is written in the vernacular. This categorization aimed primarily at a convenient subdivision of the field. This practical rationale had the side-effect of drawing strict boundaries between the subdivisions, which did not exist in Byzantium. One major point of criticism against the division into three sub-fields is that since there exist a considerable number of cases where a single author produces secular and theological and/or popular literature employing various linguistic and stylistic registers, i.e. learned and vernacular, the separation into three different categories of literature only serves to fragment the conceptual unity of the author's literary work (Trapp 1993a and 1993b, 95; Hinterberger 2002b; cf. also Kazhdan 1978).

Furthermore, the two criteria mentioned above, content and form of language, are not always compatible; indeed they are sometimes contradictory. Among the texts gathered by Beck (1971) under the label "popular literature" (Volksliteratur, δημώδης λογοτεχνία) we find not only texts written in the vernacular, but also texts in the learned language (*Aesop*, *Barlaam & Ioasaph*, *Stephanites & Ichnelates* etc.). These texts were incorporated into Beck's handbook on the grounds that they both fit the idea of popular narrative and circulated in a great number of manuscripts. In post-Byzantine times they found a broad public in a modernized linguistic form. For this reason, when we discuss our topic using German or Modern Greek, we have in mind a category of texts which does not consist exclusively of texts written in the vernacular, whereas when we use the English term "vernacular literature" we mean a corpus comprised exclusively of texts composed in the vernacular.

On the other hand, the terms *Volksliteratur*, popular literature[1] or δημώδης λογοτεχνία, suggest that the texts labelled as such have something to do with the common people. Since Beck (1971), though, it has been clear that the beginnings of literature in the vernacular have nothing to do with the "people". The first authors known to us, who to some extent used the vernacular (Theodoros Prodromos, Michael Glykas), were highly distinguished literati of their times, connected to the imperial court. Among the authors of the famous love-romances, there is a Byzantine prince (*Kallimachos*) and probably even an emperor (*Libistros*). This means that both authors

1 "Popular literature" however is less common in English; there is for instance no entry in Kazhdan et al. 1991; it is used though by Holton 1974.

and recipients of these texts belonged to the learned elite, which had little to do with the people, so that the term popular literature for this kind of text is misleading, to say the least.[2]

Let me now give two examples illustrating the arbitrary character of the criterion issue. In the *Libistros*-romance we find the beautiful description of a painting presenting the 12 allegorical figures of the Months of the Year (Lambert 1935, 116, 1017ff). This seems to be a genuinely popular motif in the otherwise rather courtly romance. Probably not many years after the original composition of the work, Manuel Philes, court-poet of Andronikos I and III, wrote a poem on the same topic in the learned language (Miller 1855, I 341-342). Both texts look back at a long tradition of similar presentations of the 12 Months, probably going back to Late Antiquity.

The satirical Ptochoprodromic poems (ed. Eideneier 1991) are supposed to express also some kind of social critique. It has been claimed that this social consciousness is connected to the form of language. But what we read in *Ptochoprodromos* III in the vernacular reminds us also of Theodoros Prodromos *Hist. Ged.* 38 written in Homeric language, and the content of the vernacular poem edited by Majuri (1920) contains references to the learned poem 71 addressed to *Theodore Stypeiotes* (see Hörandner 1974, esp. 66). Theodore Prodromos simply displays his ability as a poet by using different stylistic registers, as he is obviously proud of his ability to employ different metres.[3] So much for the connection between subject and language form.

Beck himself was aware of the fact that the term "popular literature" (Volksliteratur) may be connected with the romantic-nationalistic idea of the people as creator of literature and expressed his reservations in the introduction to his handbook (Beck 1971). From the viewpoint of Modern Greek literature, the term popular literature (δημώδης λογοτεχνία) is ideologically fraught. Yet while in the field of Modern Greek Literature new approaches have been undertaken, the views expressed in handbooks such as the History of Modern Greek Literature by Linos Polites (1975) are still prevalent. According to this viewpoint the beginning of Modern Greek Literature is intrinsically associated with the combination of the language of

2 Cupane 2003 provides a thorough discussion of the issue. In order to solve the problem, she uses the somewhat outdated term "vulgärsprachliche Literatur" (probably under the influence of *greco volgare* or *grecque vulgaire*).

3 For details of the thorny "Ptochoprodromic question" see Eideneier 1991 and especially Eideneier forthcoming).

the people and the expression of a Modern Greek ethnic consciousness, both of which are supposedly first found in the narrative of Digenes Akrites.

Just one further remark: in the rest of my talk I will use the term "vernacular" to refer to a linguistic form in literary texts, whereas by "demotic" I generally mean the written form of the spoken language.

It is generally accepted that Greek vernacular literature begins in the 12th century and flourishes from the 14th century on. Until the 16th century however the great majority of texts are written in an idiom that is often referred to as a "mixed language". This phenomenon so far has not been satisfactorily accounted for. Side by side with linguistic features which, morphologically speaking, are clearly demotic (i.e. they do not exist in ancient Greek, but are common to Modern Greek) we find forms that are entirely alien to modern *dimotiki* (participles, infinitives, archaizing noun and verb paradigms and so forth).

In my opinion, the phenomenon of the so-called mixed language is only apparently a problem. From a modern point of view, especially from a Modern Greek point of view, with the problem of diglossia in the background, the idiom in question may be confusing. As I will argue below in more detail, a written idiom (which we now call vernacular) only gradually developed on the basis of the spoken language. In order for it to function as a written idiom, features from the older written tradition were inevitably included. On the other hand, many linguistic features of the medieval vernacular that today seem to be archaisms were probably features also of the living language, as they are in modern Greek dialects. For instance, the usage of the infinitive in vernacular texts resembles that in Modern Greek dialects. On the basis of this evidence, Peter Mackridge (1996) concluded that in certain linguistic contexts the infinitive was a feature of the living medieval language. Also the apparently archaising verb endings –ουσιν and –ασιν were also used in medieval spoken language as they are today e. g. in Cypriot Greek, besides the "normal" endings –ουν and –αν. Furthermore, the usage of a considerable number of alternative forms is a general characteristic of medieval Greek, not only of the vernacular, but also of the non-vernacular (Hinterberger 2001 and forthcoming).

Regardless of their provenance (be it the spoken or the traditional written language) the linguistic features to be found in the so-called vernacular texts form a system that in itself is coherent. It is due to our insufficient knowledge of medieval Greek that essential linguistic features of these texts are usually explained as "anomalies" or as the consequence of the author's inability to write proper Greek. In this respect the Cambridge Grammar of Medieval Greek will indeed be illuminating.

Unlike most other medieval European literatures, where by vernacular we mean medieval English, German, French etc. in contrast with Latin, the Greek vernacular is not a linguistically different language, but another form of the same language. The situation therefore is less clear. Nevertheless, the term vernacular Greek seems to be self-evident. In contrast to learned Greek, which is a form of language produced according to ancient Greek grammar and model texts, vernacular Greek is based on the spoken language. In practice this means the former reminds us of ancient Greek, the latter of modern Greek. The task is further complicated by the more or less total absence of studies on the language of Byzantine learned literature. Under the surface of apparent classicizing language there are a lot of specific Byzantine features, either reflecting the influence of the living spoken language or independent developments of the written language alone.

This negative approach (that is, vernacular means non-learned) works well as long as we take into consideration extreme forms of both learned and vernacular, e.g. hexameter verses in Homeric style by Theodore Prodromos and the Escorial version of the *Digenes* poem. Furthermore, Atticizing high-style prose by definition uses morphological and syntactic features such as the dual and optative, which clearly have nothing to do with the spoken language. These then are clear-cut cases. But what should we do with texts that avoid features characteristic of the Attic register as well as definitely demotic forms? There is a rather broad grey zone of texts that are not quite learned but also not really vernacular (let me for the moment put it in this not very scholarly way).

The question of how to distinguish vernacular from non-vernacular texts has, so far, not been seriously addressed, I suppose because things seem to be totally clear. In

their notes to “*1500 Published Facsimiles of Folios From Greek Manuscripts with Vernacular Literary Content* 1180-1700),” Michael Jeffreys and Viky Doulavera (1997, p. x) explain their selection of texts as follows: “The placing of a text in the category (of vernacular) is largely decided by its systematic use of the particle “na” with a finite verb, in place of the archaic infinitive”. The authors concede “this principle(’s) ... apparent lack of an academic basis”, but emphasize that it nevertheless works well. Interestingly “early texts (especially those written before 1300) are accepted as vernacular on the basis of a few vernacular elements”. (cf. also their *Early Modern Greek Literature: General Bibliography* (4.000 items) 1100-1700, p. viii).

If we compare modern to ancient Greek the absence of the infinitive and the usage of the particle νά + finite verb form indeed is one major syntactical difference, but in some works traditionally qualified as vernacular, as for instance the *Kallimachos* romance, infinitives are frequently used. Furthermore, as we have already mentioned, the infinitive probably was still in use in the spoken language.

Another major morphological and syntactical difference between modern and ancient Greek is the absence of participles in the former, while ancient Greek has a rich and diverse range of participles. But again, participles are to be found in most vernacular texts, in some even in an impressively great number (e. g. in *Belthandros & Chrysantza*). The majority of forms however are present and aorist active participles (mostly in the nominative) and, as in the case of the infinitive, their usage is restricted to certain contexts. Also in the case of the participle we have not yet established the rules governing its usage and therefore we all too easily speak of “anomalies” and “inaccurate usage”. But according to which standard, I ask. With further specifications both the infinitive and the participle could serve as criteria for the differentiation of learned and vernacular texts. But we first need to thoroughly investigate how they are used in vernacular texts.[4] In the meantime I have no alternative to offer.

To continue, I would like to present a few texts and discuss with you the extent to which they can perhaps be classed as vernacular.

4 As Despoina Cheila (2003) has shown, participles in a wide range of Byzantine and post-Byzantine texts very often do not function as their ancient counterparts but are used more or less like a finite verb.

1) In the *Pentekontakephalon*, a rather loose discussion of various religious topics by the 12th century Cypriot monk Neophytos Enkleistos we read an interesting passage consisting of sixteen 15-syllable verses (*Pentekontakephalon* 19, 8; Soteroudes 281, 17-282, 2). Demotic features of the language are the following: vocabulary: συντυχαίνω; phonology / accentuation: δενδρόν, δάκρυα and μετάνοια both synizesised. The particle νά occurs 9 times, always after an expression of necessity (πρέπει; on the other hand, the infinitive is used after βούλομαι).

Can we call these 16 lines "vernacular" on the grounds of these features? I think we could, if the text were longer or if it were independent and not incorporated into a treatise on contrition. It does provide us, however, with another valuable example for the demotic language.

The quotation of this short prayer is however quite illuminating for the circumstances in which early demotic language is used in a written text. As in most such cases, like the spring song quoted in *De ceremoniis*, a couplet in the *Alexias* or isolated sentences in Theophanes the Confessor or the *Continuation* of Theophanes, the demotic language is used in order to render the spoken or sung word (in the present case a θρῆνος or θρηνῳδία); it is the material depiction of the living language; the written word is more or less identical with the spoken word.

Also in the Ptochoprodromic poems the parts termed as "vernacular" consist largely of fictional monologues and dialogues, and in Michael Glykas' so-called prison-poem the vernacular core is comprised of the popular sayings quoted by the author. Finally, the prayer included in Neophytos' treatise is a text purportedly recited by the monk. Thus, the "vernacular" until the 13th century is primarily used in order to render real or fictional direct speech.

I would like to suggest that demotic Greek as a literary language was originally identical with the spoken language and was used exclusively for the purpose of rendering the spoken word or direct speech. Only later on did it gradually develop into the vernacular as presented in most texts dubbed "vernacular literature", a linguistic register used also for other purposes. In its first stage it acquired the power to narrate, but always in combination with the 15-syllable verse, and only much later

did its usage extend to treatises etc. In the framework of this historical development, the 12th century's Ptochoprodromic poems mark a transitional period where the vernacular slowly transcends the confines of direct discourse. This phenomenon we also observe in the Grottaferrata version of the *Digenes* poem where demotic features are concentrated in passages consisting of direct speech, and some demotic features are to be found exclusively in these passages, whereas they are totally absent from the remainder of the text (e. g. the copula *ἔνι*). Interestingly, I don't see any differentiation of this kind in the later and purely vernacular *Escorial* version.

It is clear that while based on the spoken language a written text necessitates some essential adaptations of the spoken language and is compelled to employ features of an older written tradition (as long as a written language based on the spoken language has not yet fully developed). But to what extent do we allow the usage of features that are not clearly demotic, especially when we don't know precisely what the spoken language was like? What are the criteria that must be fulfilled in order to characterise a text as vernacular?[5]

2) In catechesis 18, Symeon the New Theologian (died 1022) exemplifies the manifold traps the Devil has prepared for the monks by exposing the procedures concerning the election of an abbot. In order to present a lively picture, Symeon uses monologue and dialogue. Especially interesting are the passages where one possible candidate tries to convince a monk to vote for him using conditional sentences as argument, e.g. (Krivochéine 1964, 270-272, l. 65-69): "... ἐὰν ἤθελον οἱ ἀδελφοί, ἵνα ἐγενόμην, καὶ πάντως ποιῆσαι εἶχον σὲ οἰκονόμον, τὸν δεῖνα καὶ δεῖνα κελλαρίτην καὶ ἀποθηκάριον, ἐγὼ δὲ ἐσχόλαζον πάντως εἰς μόνα τὰ ψυχικὰ καὶ ἵνα ἤμην ἀπὸ τῶν πραγμάτων ἐλεύθερος." ("If the brethren wanted me (to become abbot), I would become (abbot), and in any case I would make you *oikonomos*, and so and so *kellarites* and *apothekarios*,

[5] Erich Trapp suggested that, primarily on the grounds of vernacular vocabulary, the beginnings of vernacular literature could be moved from the 12th to the 11th century (John Kamateros' astrological poem in 15-syllable verses; Trapp 1993b). The usage of demotic words, especially in considerable number (as in the case of Kamateros), are surely the result of conscious choice on the part of the author; I doubt though that they alone render a text vernacular (Kamateros, it is true, uses also other linguistic features of the demotic language). Isolated demotic words however are also used in older texts; they even appear in texts that are of a more Attic tone, for the sake of humour (e.g. in the letters of Theodoros Laskaris, 13th c.).

and I would occupy myself exclusively with issues of the soul and would be free from practical matters”). Sentences like this one are definitely non-learned Greek and tell us much about the development of unreal conditional clauses (εἶχον + infinitive), a linguistic feature seldom used in vernacular texts. Symeon also uses morphologically demotic features such as the ending –εσαι for the 2nd person middle and passive voice. Again we observe that features of demotic language are used in order to render a dialogue. One could argue that in cases of this kind the demotic language has already developed into a more sophisticated language register with, however, restricted applications. Symeon's text provides interesting linguistic material for the history of the Greek language, but it is not vernacular literature.

3) The Vienna theologicus Graecus codex 244 is a manuscript famous for the collection of masterpieces of vernacular literature it contains (cf. the recent study of Vejleskov 2005). On folios 79r-83v (that is, after the *Apollonios* and before the *Poulologos*) there is a peculiar text usually referred to as “Dialogue between Panagiotes and the azymites” (no. 13 according to the description of the codex by Hunger & Lackner 1992,148, with further bibliography), which so far has not yet attracted the attention of Early Modern Greek studies. This dialogue is a rather rude discussion between an orthodox Greek and a member of the Roman Catholic church, which the text declares to have taken place under Michael VIII Paleologus. Despite the introduction in a rather formal (though far from learned) language and quite a fair number of non-demotic elements, there can be little doubt that linguistically the text ranks as vernacular. In this case what is in question is the literary character of the text. What is this text? Is it a persiflage, a satire, a ridiculing pamphlet against the Church of Rome (remember that the same codex contains the *Spanos*, No. 25, probably also directed against the Catholic clergy, cf. Zachariadou 2000)? In any case, it does not fit into the usual literary categories.

4) Ioannes Kanabutzes (mid 15th c.)

On a previous occasion I had the opportunity to plead for Kanabutzes' text as vernacular literature (Hinterberger 2002a). The interesting thing here is that, in my opinion, the text on the surface seems to be learned because of the virtually total lack

of definitely demotic morphology, but nevertheless is vernacular in its deep structure. Most medieval Greek texts belong neither to the category of Atticizing literature nor to vernacular literature, but are located somewhere in between. Most texts avoid syntactic features foreign to the spoken language of their time. But traditionally only those texts whose language consists of morphologically demotic words are labelled vernacular, regardless of whether it is close to the spoken language in terms of syntax. It should be stressed that the majority of grammatical endings is the same in both learned and vernacular Greek (e.g. indicative active of the verb in all tenses, declension of o-stems). With regard to Kanabutzes, I believe that it is irrelevant for the general character of a text whether forms such as the personal pronoun αὐτόν, the possessive pronoun αὐτοῦ or the particle ἵνα are used or their purely demotic counterparts τον, του and νά. I would suggest that in many cases it is pure orthographical convention that determines the form regardless of pronunciation, just as in many, even rather late, manuscripts of vernacular texts the accent is placed on the first of two consecutive vowels, while we know that in the spoken language they had been synizesised long before (e. g. Συρία – Συριά, καρδία – καρδιά). Whatever the case, it does not affect the overall linguistic structure of a text, if it has αὐτόν or τον, as long as in terms of syntax they are used in the same way. Moreover, I would like to argue that the synthetic perfect and pluperfect in most Byzantine texts are used like a simple aorist and thus do not alter the language character (cf. Hinterberger forthcoming). Some of these forms were so widely used instead of normal aorist forms that they are the real "normal" forms (e.g. γέγονα, ἔποικα) – even in otherwise "clearly" vernacular texts.

5) At the end of the 15th century George Sphrantzes in his memoirs renders direct speech in a linguistic form that probably reflects closely the authentic spoken language. It is interesting to observe that for the narrative passages of his text the author uses a language-form clearly different from that used for the rendering of direct speech. However, his main idiom for the narrative is also definitely non-learned, but could be characterized as an early form of the literary vernacular in prose texts, in Sphrantzes' case heavily influenced by the simple language of international diplomatic contacts, as we can discern from the 13th century on (cf.

Hinterberger 2005). The quality of Sphrantzes' text as a forerunner of early modern Greek prose was only recently appreciated when excerpts of the memoirs were incorporated into an anthology of Early Modern Greek prose narrative (Kechagioglou 2001).

If we have a look at the short passages chosen for this anthology (Kechagioglou 2001, 64-69 = Romano 1990, 44-46 and 132-146) we find characteristically demotic features such as the copula ἔνι, νά+subjunctive and numerous demotic words (τσάγκρα, τσόκος, ἔπιασα, σκοτώνω, ἐκειτόμην). On the other hand, the text is full of participles (much more than one would expect in an ancient Greek text – a characteristic feature of simple Schriftkoine) and the infinitive, but restricted to a few contexts, such as preposition + article + inf. or dependent on verbs expressing possibility. In contrast to other texts we have discussed, Sphrantzes makes ample use of the dative. The most striking vernacular feature probably is his paratactic style, and I suppose that it was primarily on the grounds of this colloquial style that this text has been incorporated into Kechagioglou's anthology.

After the presentation of all these confusing observations I still have no answer to the initial question "How can we define vernacular literature?" But perhaps we can draw some conclusions pertinent to this question:

1) Vernacular literature does not mean popular literature. The first attempts at writing vernacular literature were undertaken by members of the educated elite who addressed primarily members of the imperial court. Also the topics and motifs of early vernacular literature are not popular ones. Thus the main criterion for characterizing a text as vernacular is the language used in the text.

2) The vernacular is not the spoken language. The language used for the composition of what we call vernacular literature, especially literature in 15-syllable verse, is an artistic, literary language, grammatically based on the spoken language, but adapting it to the demands of literary texts, by enriching its vocabulary (with features foreign to the spoken language), exploiting and thus emphasizing features that were probably not predominant in the spoken language, but proved to be extremely functional in 15-syllable verse (e. g. alternative forms), and finally by incorporating numerous

elements of the learned language.

3) Isolated passages in demotic Greek do not form works of vernacular literature. Only when the vernacular is by and large uniformly used throughout the entire text are we entitled to speak of vernacular literature proper. The Ptochoprodromic poems as well as Glykas' poem mark a transitional stage in the development of vernacular literature. — I should underline that by uniform usage of the vernacular I do not mean a "pure" vernacular without so-called archaising features.

4) The vernacular is not Standard Modern Greek. The presence of νά+finite verb instead of the infinitive cannot suffice as a criterion for classifying a text as vernacular. In numerous texts, not only of the early period, that are generally regarded as vernacular, the infinitive and the participle are frequently used, although their usage is restricted to certain linguistic contexts that may well reflect their limited usage also in the spoken language. A more useful criterion, perhaps, is word-order. But here further analysis is required.

A definitive answer to the question posed in the title of my paper, however, will have to await the completion of the Cambridge Medieval Grammar project.

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